

The Case and The Girl

By Randall Parrish

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"MY FIANCE!"

SYNOPSIS.—Answering an advertisement calling for a young man willing to engage in service of danger, Matthew West, ex-service man just returned from France, where he had been captain of engineers, meets Natalie Coolidge, writer of the advertisement, and without being instructed as to his probable duties, is engaged by her. Matt knows he's going blind, but the girl is so charming that he just can't say no. Beside, the war has merely intensified his thirst for adventure.

CHAPTER I—Continued.

"Take the gentleman's bag to the blue room, Sexton," she said calmly, "and then lay out his evening clothes."

"Yes, miss."

"I will be in the hall when you come down, Captain, but there is no hurry."

West followed the servant up the softly carpeted stairs, finding the apartment assigned him not only extremely comfortable, but even elegant in its furnishings. Evidently he was in a home of wealth and refinement. Who could this strange girl be? this Natalie Coolidge? And what could she possibly desire of him? He stood immersed in these thoughts, when Sexton spoke.

"Shall I assist you, sir?"

"No; it will not be necessary. What is the hour for dinner?"

"Seven o'clock, sir."

"I have ample time, then. That will be all."

The man retired noiselessly, closing the door after him, and West began slowly to dress, rather amused at the care he took, that all details should be as correct as possible. Unquestionably the girl interested him oddly. He endeavored to analyze what constituted her peculiar attractiveness, but without arriving at any definite conclusion. She was young, of course, and undeniably pretty, with eyes really remarkable, and a smile not to be easily forgotten. Then she was so self-poised, so confident of herself, so naturally informed. All these things had their charm, and, coupled with her undoubted beauty, left his brain in a whirl.

He was satisfactorily dressed at last, and descended the broad stairs, conscious of a thrill of expectancy.

Miss Coolidge met him in the dimly lighted vacancy of the hall with smiling eyes of welcome. She was in evening dress, a creamy satin, revealing white shoulders, and rounded, beautifully molded arms, visible beneath folds of filmy lace. If he had dreamed the girl attractive before in the plainness of street costume, he now beheld in her a new vision of loveliness. His heart throbbed at the sight, every nerve tingling to the intimate tones of her voice.

"Again you please me," she said, surveying him critically. "Really this is too much, the wonderful way in which you meet every test."

"You mean in clothes?"

"In everything, so far. Clothes—yes; do they not reveal the very soul of a man? I hardly think I could ever have forgiven if you had come down not looking the part you are to play."

"Nor could I have forgiven myself, if I am to enjoy the pleasure of taking you in to dinner."

"That privilege is yours even without the asking. But," quizzically, and glancing up frankly into his eyes, "You may not care when the time comes. For the great test arrives first. So, buck up, Captain, for you are going to have the shock of your life. Whatever you do, even if you feel that you are about to faint, don't, for my sake, let your face show it."

"But," he protested, "give me some warning, some opportunity to prepare for such an emergency."

"No," she laughed gaily, "there is no time; it is ordained to fall upon you like a thunderbolt. They are all in there waiting for us now. You will offer me your arm."

He accompanied her, amused, yet bewildered, through the wide archway into the more brilliantly lighted drawing room. It was a magnificent apartment, containing a half dozen people. The one nearest the entrance was a man of middle age, exceedingly pompous and dignified, who immediately arose to his feet, expectantly. Miss Coolidge cordially extended her hand in greeting.

"So glad to learn you could be out, Judge," she said, the least perceptible hesitancy in her voice. "Permit me to present Judge Cable, of the Supreme court; Captain West, my fiance."

CHAPTER II

Miss Coolidge Explains.

For an instant West was absolutely helpless to assert himself. The calm

assurance of the girl's voice in this unexpected introduction left his brain paralyzed with bewilderment. Yet his features did not betray his condition, nor did he entirely lose control over himself. Fortunately he was not compelled to speak, as Cable voiced his own surprise fluently.

"Well, well," he exclaimed. "This is certainly startling, Natalie. I am, indeed, bereft of words, yet I congratulate you, sir. Captain—Captain West, I think was the name? You are then in the service, sir?"

"Discharged from the Engineers."

"Ah, exactly. I can hardly adjust myself. Friends, come forward. I have to make an announcement extraordinary. It seems this sly minx has arranged a surprise for all of us. Perchance this was the purpose of our little dinner party?"

"Oh, no, Judge," protested Miss Coolidge, her cheeks flushed, yet otherwise perfectly cool and self-possessed. "Really, this was unexpected, even to myself. I was not so much as aware that Captain West was in the city until a very short time ago. I am sure he will bear me out in this statement."

"I could not do otherwise, and be truthful," West felt compelled to admit.

"But what is this all about?" asked a female voice eagerly. "Remember we have not heard, Judge Cable."

"It is my pleasure then," he said gallantly, bowing, and at once instituting himself as master of ceremonies, "to introduce to you, Miss Natalie's fiance, Captain West—Mrs. Lonsdale, Professor Scott, Miss Margaret Willis, Colonel LeFranc, Mrs. Wilber Somers. Possibly there may be no necessity of my presenting the next gentleman—Mr. Percival Coolidge."

"Oh, but there is," the last mentioned interposed, a tall, rather portly man, with grey hair and mustache, "I must confess this is as much a surprise to me as to any one present. However," he grasped West's hand with apparent cordiality, "I hasten to add my congratulations, and to wish Natalie all the happiness possible."

The group slowly broke up, the members still discussing the undoubted surprise of this announcement. West found himself confronting Colonel LeFranc and Percival Coolidge, the latter instantly engaging him in conversation, evidently seeking more definite information.

"This engagement with my niece," he said uneasily, "must have been rather sudden? Even your name is quite unfamiliar to me."

"It was, indeed," admitted West, who had now completely recovered his nerve, and even begun to enjoy the situation. "Since my return from abroad."

"You were with the army in France?"

"In an engineer regiment. I have been in America only two weeks."

"Ah, indeed. And this is your home?" Realizing that the elder Coolidge was diligently searching for information, West decided the best method would be a full confession.

"Oh, no," he said candidly, "I am from the South—Atlanta, Georgia. My father is a district judge, Robert Peel West, quite widely known, and my mother belonged to the Bullock family. I am a graduate of the University of Virginia, and also of the Massachusetts Polytechnic. Before the war I was connected for a short time with a well-known firm of engineers in this city, but, since my return, I have not resumed professional work. Having been wounded in France, I have felt entitled to a little rest after my return."

"Quite interesting, I am sure," Coolidge turned to the colonel. "You are southern also, I believe?"

"Very much so," was the quick response. "And I chance to know the name of Judge West rather well. I congratulate your niece on her choice of a life companion. There is no better blood in Georgia."

West passed the ensuing evening rather pleasantly, although obliged to be always on his guard against any incautious remark. Mr. Percival Coolidge was outwardly cordial enough, yet his manner continued distinctly reserved, and somewhat cold. West, however, attributed this largely to the nature of the man, and finally dismissed the thought from his mind altogether. The person who continued to puzzle him most was Natalie Coolidge, nor was he able to approach her in any way so as to obtain a whispered private word of guidance. He ventured upon thin ice once or twice most carefully, but the information obtained was infinitesimal, although it bore to some extent on the problem confronting him. The colonel innocent-

ly lifted the veil slightly, permitting him to learn that this was a week-end party, and that Miss Coolidge was the mistress of the place, her parents having been dead for two years. Percival Coolidge, her father's brother, and a manufacturer in the city, was her guardian, and the affairs of the estate were not yet entirely liquidated. Beyond this he apparently knew nothing of the family history, which he felt at liberty to communicate.

West was assigned to escort Miss Willis, a tall willowy blonde, and quite talkative. Into dinner, but her conversation ran largely to the theatrical offerings in town, and he found it impossible to change her trend of thought into other channels. Once the smiling Natalie appealed to him, familiarly calling him "Matt" across the table, and he responded with equal intimacy, yet her eyes avoided his, and it was plainly evident to his self-consciousness, that her remark was merely part of the play. More and more her actions mystified and perplexed; he could not discover the key to her hidden motive, or guess at her purpose in this masquerade. Nothing remained but for him to go quietly forward, playing the part assigned. She coolly and deliberately defeated every effort he made to get her alone, and yet this was accomplished in a manner so as not to attract the attention of others. Even Percival Coolidge, who, West felt, was watching them both shrewdly, never suspected the quiet game of hide and seek being played under his very eyes. As the evening progressed West became almost convinced that Natalie's principal object was to deceive this gentleman; that she really cared nothing for what the others might think, or say. It was all a masterpiece of acting, so exceedingly well done, as to finally convince the young man that she was greatly in earnest as to its success. She desired Percival Coolidge to have no lingering doubt of her engagement. And, finding all opportunity of explanation denied him, West yielded to the inevitable, and, for the evening at least, silently accepted his fate.

Nor did circumstances favor him when the company finally broke up, and retired for the night. He had thought this moment might be propitious, but she calmly outgeneraled him again, suddenly bidding the men remain and smoke as long as they pleased, and disappearing herself up the stairway with Miss Willis. West, convinced that her retirement was final, soon sought his own room. It was eleven o'clock of a bright, moonlight night, and, feeling in no degree sleepy, he seated himself at the window to finish his cigar. Again and again his mind reviewed the strange events of the evening, unable to arrive at any definite conclusion. The harder he sought to delve into the mystery, the more obscure it became.

He had, indeed, reached some conclusions already. These might not be correct, yet they were already implanted in his mind. The guests of the night were mere puppets, having no real connection with the game being played, utterly ignorant of what was going on behind the scenes. The only one present having any real part was Percival Coolidge, and West had taken an instinctive dislike to this man. Only one explanation flashed into his mind to account for Miss Coolidge's unexpected announcement of an engagement between them—this would excuse any future intimacy; would enable them to meet alone freely without arousing comment. This appealed to him as the most reasonable explanation of the situation. But beyond this vague guess, it was impossible to delve.

Tired by the uselessness of such thinking West finally sought the bed, and must have slept, although scarcely aware that he had closed his eyes. Some slight noise aroused him. The door leading into the hall, which he had failed to lock, stood partially ajar, and his eyes caught the vague glimpse of a figure gliding swiftly through the opening. With one bound he was upon his feet, springing recklessly forward. The hall was dark, but for a patch of moonlight at the further end. Against this he caught an instant, flitting glimpse of the intruder. It was a woman, yet even as his eyes told him this, she seemed to vanish into thin air—the hall was empty.

Vague and indistinct as was that fleeting vision in the moonlight, West felt no doubt as to the identity of his visitor—the woman was Natalie Coolidge. His one glimpse of her vanishing figure assured him of this fact, and he drew back instantly, unwilling to follow. Where she had gone he neither knew, nor cared. She had come to his room secretly, supposing him asleep, and this surprising knowledge dominated his mind. What could such an act mean? There was mystery here, at least, a mystery beyond his

power of discernment. However, this recognition rather hardened him to his task, than otherwise.

This time he locked the outer door carefully, and lay down on the bed, wondering if there would be any further developments. As he attempted to think, he was listening eagerly for the slightest sound of movement in the hall. There was none. He could only wait, and watch for the next move. Perhaps the morning would bring full explanation. With this conception in his mind, his head sought the pillow, and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

The long training of army service caused West to awaken early, while the house was yet quiet, but with the dawn already red in the east. He crossed to the window, and looked out, caught the flutter of a white skirt, and realized instantly that, early as the hour was, Natalie Coolidge was already up and about. He wondered if her presence might not be an invitation for him? Perhaps she had deliberately chosen this early hour, before the others awoke, to explain her strange conduct of the previous evening? At least, here was an opportunity to see and talk with her alone.

He dressed swiftly, and slipped noiselessly downstairs, unlocking the front door, and emerging into the fresh air, without encountering any stray members of the household. He passed beyond a vine-draped arbor before she realized his approach, and straightened up, welcoming him with a little laugh, her eyes full of demure mischief.

"I rather suspected army discipline had not entirely worn off," she said pleasantly, "and that you might still prove to be an early riser."

"And does this expectation account for your presence?"

"Not wholly; it has become a habit with me. However, I promised to be very frank with you, did I not? Then I will begin now; this morning I really hoped I might see you for a moment before the others were stirring—we have so much to talk about."

"It certainly seems so to me," he responded honestly, yet not greatly encouraged by the amusement in her eyes. "Surely you cannot expect real service when given so blindly?"

"No, I do not. I mean to trust you fully. It is the only way; but do you still truly wish to serve?"

"I am enlisted in the cause without reserve," he insisted warmly. "While I learned but little last evening, that little was enough to convince me there is something strange under the surface. Your calling me to your assistance is no joke—you actually need me."

"I need some one on whose judgment and courage I can rely," she answered earnestly, "and I believe now that you are the one. It is rather an odd situation, Captain West, but the circumstances surely justify my action. Perhaps I shall have time to partly explain now."

She seemingly found it difficult to begin her story. The flush deepened on her cheeks, and her lips parted.

"It really seems so ridiculous," she explained at last desperately. "Almost like a dream of fancy, and I hardly know how to put the situation into words. If I were ten years younger I would almost be convinced myself that it was all imaginary, yet everything I tell you is true. I wonder if you will believe me?"

"Do not question that. I realize fully your earnestness."

"Yet I am going to test your credulity, just the same. Those people you met last evening have nothing to do with the story—none of them, at least, unless it may possibly be Percival Coolidge. I am rather afraid of him; I always have been. I believe he knows what all this trouble means, but I do not dare go and talk with him about it. That is really what is the matter, I suppose—there is no one I can talk to; they would only laugh at me."

"My father was Steven Coolidge, and was very wealthy. He did not marry until late in life, and, I have reason to believe it was a great disappointment to his brother Percival that a child was born. Perhaps I ought not to make such a statement, but much has occurred to impress me with his dislike—"

"He is your guardian?"

"Yes; you learned that last night?"

"From the colonel; he seemed to enjoy talking, and naturally, I was curious. Has Percival Coolidge wealth of his own?"

"You mean that fool story about some one else pretending to be her?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

In Training.

"The house I have moved into is by the railway." "Doesn't that disturb your sleep?" "No. They say that I can get used to it in a few nights, and so for the first week or so I am sleeping in a hotel."—Stockholm Kasper.

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